REVIEW ESSAY

INTERRUPTING THE GENDER NARRATIVE: IN-BETWEEN MASCULINITIES

Marshall Clark. ***Masculinitas: Culture, Gender, and Politics in Indonesia.*** **Clayton: Monash University Press, 2010. 182 pp.**

Evelyn Blackwood. ***Falling into the Lesbi World: Desire and Difference in Indonesia.*** **Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010. 251 pp.**

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As a Cornell University graduate student studying gender in Java in the 1980s, I still recall an evening seminar on campus during which Ben Anderson peppered Barbara Hatley with questions following her analysis of gender roles in kethoprak theater.[1] After several rhetorical examples of how masculinity and femininity have shifted aesthetic conventions in Java, he asked her, quizzically: "How do you know you are a woman?" Although she attempted several times to respond, the answer seemed obvious to me: as she formulated an answer, he could not resist interrupting her. In that era when scholarship on gender focused on women and femininity, mythic narratives about masculinity made "asking the man question," as Marshall Clark puts it, both redundant and unnecessary (p. 145). Patriarchal privilege was still embodied in dominating the discourse, whereas attending to the emotional valence of *malu,* or "masculine inferiority, humiliation, and indignation" had not yet been articulated as an interpretative project for understanding Indonesia, as Clark does (p. 95). Ironically,

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[1] Barbara Hatley, "Texts and Contexts: The Roro Mendut Folk Legend on Stage and Screen," in *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia,* Monash University Winter Lectures Monograph, 1988, pp. 14–24.

Anderson would do so himself in his analysis of political shame as "a progressive and emancipating" dynamic for nationalism, including Indonesia.[2]

Today, both Blackwood and Clark contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship on gender that, until recently, focused on women, and must now address the turbulent and compelling world of masculinities—alternative, artistic, and axiomatic of new political and cultural dynamics in the twenty-first century. Fortunately, both of these scintillating studies guide us to a more critical and nuanced discussion of civil rights for minorities and political discourse in archipelago societies, as well as transnational communities. Each author makes the case for political recognition, tolerance, and acknowledgment of previously censored intimate identities and relationships, on the one hand, and of greater appreciation for artistic works that challenge repressive political discourse of New Order and post-New Order authoritarianism, on the other. Each author does so by focusing on masculinities. Evelyn Blackwood's ethnography of the contradictory female masculinity of "tombois" (women who identify as men) among female couples in Padang, Sumatra; and Marshall Clark's deft tour of the equally understudied heterosexual masculine characters in fiction, poetry, and film since the 1960s, both demonstrate that gender is still, after all, central to the understanding of Southeast Asian society and polities.[3] To what degree did the *Reformasi* era after 1998 allow for more expression of emergent identities? Was it the transnational multilingualism Blackwood astutely highlights in her final chapter that has catapulted researchers and Indonesianists into a new conversation about gender identities?. Comparative historical scholarship has demonstrated premodern roots of plural gender and sexual identities in Asian civilizations.[4] Clark is clear that the new generation of scholars should not rush too quickly to study alternative masculinities, when the heterosexual and normative versions still deserve close attention, particularly as they intersect with the enduring renovation of patriarchal ideologies and institutions post-New Order. It is a pleasure to recommend these books for reading, teaching, and debate.

Evelyn Blackwood, known for her central, defining work integrating Indonesian ethnology and queer studies, gives a thorough and compelling ethnographic portrait of "tomboi" and their partners (femme, or girlfriend) in Padang, primarily through personal narratives on the work of what Judith Butler has called "performing gender."[5] The ethnography spans the life cycle, from early childhood socialization to the "spaces of everyday life" (p. 92), and publicized topics in national media and transnational activism. Her elegant study is a personal quest to overcome her own misapprehension of female masculinity among Indonesians in the 1990s. The ambitious argument asks how gender is imbricated in (racial) hierarchies and colonial contexts in Southeast Asia, and why tombois have had ambivalent reception in "the lesbi world."

[2] Benedict Anderson, "Long Live Shame! The Good Side of Nations and Nationalism," public lecture, November 8, 2011, University of Washington, Seattle WA.

[3] Clark's literary analysis of fiction and poetry is juxtaposed with Indonesian cinematography, including primarily films since the end of the New Order. Clark's bibliography includes a list of these films, pp. 151–52.

[4] Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York. NY: Routledge, 2002).

[5] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990, 1999).

Blackwood's first chapters reach beyond the stereotypes of conventional gender dichotomies in New Order Indonesia to acknowledge how the figure of tomboi ironically reaffirmed government ideologies and Islamic scholars' conceptions of complementary male and female social roles. This ethnography demonstrates that attention to marginal communities is invaluable to understanding dominant institutions of kinship, religion, and social rank.[6] Ironically, Blackwood concludes:

> Gender is no more than a norm; it is the acceptance of a category of difference based on bodies ... And yet it also creates the possibility to exceed those binary oppositions because of the "truth" that lies at the heart of gender, that norms are fixed in both senses of the word; they are extremely rigid, and they are unequally defined. (p. 208)

Blackwood's succinct monograph presumes minimal knowledge of Indonesian (or Minangkabau) society and culture, and is therefore appropriate for undergraduates. It seamlessly integrates pioneering scholarship by Saskia Weiringa and Dede Oetomo with the words of ordinary Indonesians, whose lives are glimpsed through diverse sources: national magazines, personal narratives of domestic arrangements, households, and new kin structures. I found it particularly intriguing that the gender hierarchy privileging tombois (or femmes) included the ability to travel freely beyond Padang, as a basis for broader knowledge and authority for tombois, as well as the litmus test for modernity: whether "femme" partners smoked in urban public contexts (pp. 96–97). Both travel and tobacco have long been signs of cosmopolitan contact and claims to higher rank in Southeast Asian societies,[7] and in these cases, show it is not the body that defines the gender norm, but the actions of those claiming manhood (or modernity). I would have liked to hear what Blackwood, or those she studied, has to say about Clark's analysis of the debates over pornography and censorship, and his disagreement with Boellstorff's claim that homophobic attacks reveal a "new masculinized cast to Indonesia" (Clark, p. 93). It seems noteworthy that tombois were allowed the freedom to appear male by dress, activity, and travel in regional communities, as well as Jakarta's cosmopolitan arenas, and not threatened with gang rape for identifying as men. If anthropology can contribute to a more dialogic, postcolonial scholarship of minority communities, Blackwood's study is an exemplary success.

In a similar fashion, Marshall Clark argues that gender analysis of women and femininity has obscured attention to heterosexual masculinity, which has shaped so much of New Order and post-*Reformasi* political discourse, and, more importantly, counterpoint and critical stances. The genius of this book is the fluent traversing of multiple artistic forms as they puncture eras of censorship, from the consideration of the 1968 scandalous short story "Langit Makin Mendung" to current cinema, particularly the examination of horror in the films of Rudi Soedjarwo, and contentious

[6] Jeffrey Hadler, *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resistance in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[7] Anna Lowenhaut Tsing, "Gender and Performance in Meratus Dispute Settlement," in *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. Jane M. Atkinson and Shelley Errington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 95–125. Tsing speaks of "male self-aggrandisement" and how "... ambitious women can and do try to enter the action ... [by using] violence, innuendos of sexual prowess, and spiritual inspiration to attempt to be heard; but women rarely get as far with these tactics as men because they are tactics biased for male play" (p. 120).

erotic poems by Binhad Nurrohmat, which Clark translates extensively in the final chapter. Film studies, which views South Asia as the obvious global heartland, should take notice: the film scene in Jakarta deserves equal attention to those in Mumbai for understanding the political valence of cultural and artistic expression in Asia. *Masculinitas* is the perfect foil to address this lacuna. In his innovative approach to ideologies of gender shaping manhood in Indonesia, and normative masculinity in particular, Clark directs attention to dynamics of censorship in Indonesian media, as well as literary and classic arts from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth Mankind*, to revitalize an analysis of the tenacity of authoritarianism, as well as to credit those cultural artists who resist both imposed and self-censorship. Again, the monograph presumes no specialized regional knowledge of Indonesia; readers are informed simultaneously of classic studies of *wayang* theater (shadow plays) and television and film dramas since the 1970s.[8]

Both Blackwood and Clark draw on common cultural capital of *wayang* to discuss masculine women and their embodied hybridities, on the one hand, and the dynamic of "rage and shame" provoking aggression, on the other. The extensive consideration of *wayang* characters, such as Ayu Utami's portrait of Bambang Wisanggeni, will please older Indonesianists, but it is the infusion of new characters from radio, television, and cinema scripts that gives the argument that masculine gender deserves attention its zest and comparative value. Clark moves from the "heroes and antiheroes" of historical novels, through archetypes and alternative masculinities, as prelude to the heart of the book to assess the cultural effects of masculinitas on political discourse in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Considering the self-parody and moral polarities in contemporary Indonesian-arts portraits of men, Clark muses that the era of heroes is long gone. Yet, in the wake of criticism of male characters as antiheroes, Riri Riza himself asks, "... aren't we all weak?" (p. 80). Clark concludes, "[This is] what is so exciting and daunting about Indonesia today—the emergence of so many identities that have been suppressed for so long" (p. 87).

With this quote, we can also hear the phrasing of a different question about masculinity as a gender, hinged to sexuality in individuals' experience. In her chapter Desire and Difference, Blackwood explores how gender precedes sexual identity for tombois (p. 127). One significant change since the 1980s is that now ethnographers must listen for and address the effects of global English to name alterity in Indonesia, the porous slippage between English and Bahasa, the ease with which one "falls into" a world of borrowed terms—lesbi, tomboi, mami/papi, and masculinitas. Even in the final chapter of Blackwood's study, which considers the transnational communities and linguistic innovations of Bahasa waria and Bahasa gay,[9] she still relies on "what people say" about their experiences. Blackwood's ethnographic layering of everyday testimony seeks evidence from, and about, new masculinities; tombois are interviewed, and their lives revealed in an energetic fashion. What if, like the shadows and songs from *wayang* performances, new gender identities extend past, and beyond, individual

[8] The films discussed include *Kuldesak* (1998), directed by Nan T. Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani, and Riri Raxa; *Pocong 1*, *Pocong 2*, and *Pocong 3* (2006, 2007), directed by Rudi Soedjarwo; and others by, for example, Garin Nugroho and Nia Dinata.

[9] Dede Oetomo, "Kamus Gay/Waria Indonesia," *GAYa Nusantara* 9 (1989): 39–42.

human beings, and are not encapsulated within literary characters, human bodies, or even shared partnerships? By emphasizing either the practices and discourse of "doing gender" in ethnography, or Clark's readings of poems and film scripts from a mimetic theory of symbolic representation, both researchers rely on conversations about lives, memories, experiences, and desires. This privileges narrative responses by characters in texts and ethnographic subjects. Much can be learned about gender from art and conversation; yet, sometimes images and anecdotes obscure the degree to which human agency cannot simultaneously explain desire and the spaces of silences that precede gender identities. For that, we must document the strange effect that the act of speaking, and language itself, has on human sexuality and subjectivity.

In this light, in a recent interview in the *Jakarta Post* with Indonesian cinema scholar Intan Paramaditha, she traverses transnational bilingualism in her career and creative process as both a writer and a scholar (which she describes as "being an amphibian").[10] Intan, author of short stories on women, horror, and, most recently, a forthcoming novel, *Manusia Kejepit* (In Between Human), suggests that her own attention to gender began as a way to interrogate masculinity (specifically, the authority of her own father), to understand not the "new man" in Indonesia (and the melding of national obligations with feminist expectations), but the repressive contexts in which artists develop a desire to write. Perhaps the alternative to discourse about masculinities would be to examine the space in-between its representations (in texts, film, and media) and the emotive energy that artists (and scholars?) invite in response to their works. Could it be that new gender identities are created as much by the "traveling and traversing between two worlds" Intan claims for herself?

Fortunately, readers are provided with rich examples with which to form their own conclusions about how interrogating masculinities interrupts political censorship. Clark especially embraces the thesis that Indonesian art allows one to dislocate, destabilize, or exorcise, just as *ruwatan bumi* was "radically modernized" and allowed younger artists to criticize the "state's patriarchal vision of the nation" (pp. 3–8). In Clark's analysis, the impetus of this aesthetic is populist anger, or angst, but it is also possible that linguistic energy and power trump the hydraulics of emotion in which "... artists do little more than act as politically useful social safety valves, like pressure cookers letting off a little steam" (p. 11). Clark muses toward the end of his book whether "masculinitas," and heterosexual masculinity in particular, signals historical epochs, cosmopolitan culture, and political fractures in global capitalism stretching throughout Indonesia today. Must these words *only* focus our attention on individual lives, or could we queer regional studies of Southeast Asia itself in the twenty-first century? These books are an excellent place to begin.

[10] Novia D. Rulistia, "Intan Paramaditha: In-between Two Worlds," *Jakarta Post*, September 15, 2014.